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(Article begins on next page)

Female spouses at the doors of fortress Europe

Marriage and security at consulate offices in Cameroon

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Abstract

This article will focus on marriage related forms of migration in Cameroon and will reconsider the gendered nature of fortress Europe by critically questioning how regulatory technologies at consulate offices grant or withhold access to Europe to both men and women. In their daily work, consulate officers construct some visa applicants and family members as deviant criminals, while others are framed as in need of protection and rescue. Wanting to go away from a statist driven security agenda on migration, I set out to do an ethnography of the regulatory framework of emigration within which people in Cameroon are obliged to try to achieve their ambitions of mobility – amongst others to achieve ‘security’ for the future of their families. I will draw on observations of marriage visa interviews at the French consulate service in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Regulatory dynamics at the French consulate office are driven by fears and accusations that visa applicants might be committing fraud – often with respect to the welfare state – for their selfish personal purposes. I argue that aspiring migrant women are seen as security threats precisely because consulate officers and aspiring migrant women distribute care needs and social risks differently between state, family, and individual.

Keywords: gender, migration, marriage migration, migration control, security, consulates

At the French Embassy in Yaoundé, Cameroon, two printouts of e-mails hung on the walls of the little cubicle in which the consulate officers worked. In one of the e-mails, an elderly and sick French man, who is married to a Cameroonian woman in France, wrote to the consulate to denounce his wife for being a fraud.

I only needed a wife, not a forger-ess. [...] We only live off social benefits because she never wanted to work and is sending half of all benefits down to her mother. [...] The children and I can only watch the disaster. Thank you for your understanding and for protecting and helping me. Thank you.²

The man added that, because he was ill with Parkinson's disease, he was not in a position to be in charge of the paperwork himself. The message of the e-mail is clear: according to this man, Cameroonian wives are selfish, lazy, and greedy. While vulnerable French men want love and children, Cameroonian women are involved with 'fraud' or are 'fake' themselves.

When observing for a few weeks the work of the French consulate office in Yaoundé, I was struck by the tone used when talking about marriage migration. It was articulated as a security issue and, more strikingly, the security threat was located with Cameroonian spouses and women. When asking the consulate staff at the Embassy that the cases of these e-mail posters surely must represent extreme situations, I was told that such narratives are much more common than I would think. The fact that these e-mails were pinned on the wall conveyed the inherent assumption within the regulatory dynamics of the state's governance of marriage migration. The strongest suspicions upheld against applicants referred to marriage, fraud, and money. Internet marriages were strongly condemned and women who engage in these were judged for being materialistic and selfish. The presence of even just a few of those e-mails within the office space of the consulate workers constituted justification for the rationale of consulate work – a regular reminder of the security issues at stake.

In recent years, European nation states have increasingly sought to externalise immigration control and border security. Discussions on fortress Europe often localise borders in North African locations. Consequently, much attention is paid to undocumented crossings. Borders operate, however, through much more capillary power dynamics. Most irregular migration, for example, occurs through entirely legal border crossings. The effects of border regimes are thus tangible to populations with mobile ambitions far beyond the physical manifestation of border posts and border guards. Embassies and visa procedures have become ever more important sites for the securing of fortress Europe. This article takes embassies as delocalised borders where visa procedures constitute practices and performances of bordering (Bigo & Guild, 2005; Salter, 2006). Through visa interviews and related regulatory procedures, embassy staff both create and secure the border.

Through an analysis of how the French consulate in Cameroon deals

with marriage related visa applications, this article seeks to contribute to our understanding of how border security plays out in state practices on the ground. The article asks what marriage visa interviews can tell us about the regulatory logics that underlie the state's, as well as the migrant woman's, construction of security and security threats. It does so by tracing out socio-cultural norms of relatedness that are implicit in visa application procedures for marriage migration. Multiple conceptions of security issues within the realm of the state and the family mutually influence each other and lead to a transformation of both family norms and border security.

The article focuses on the French consulate as a case study for the study of security concerns that emerge in state dynamics of regulation vis-à-vis marriage migrants. What the article refers to as 'marriage visas' are, technically speaking, visas for family reunions. After a discussion of how marriage migration is framed and represented by state actors, this article will dive into the constructions of security at the French consulate. The interviews analysed here are of limited importance for actual immigration decisions, but are far from irrelevant as they, instead, serve an important symbolic and performative function. They elicit confessions from applicants and re-instate the normativity of kinship and marital ideals that the French state wishes to impose. The interviews and e-mails posted on the walls are thus to be understood as performing, rather than implementing the border (spectacle).

Researching fortress Europe

The article project specifically is based on two weeks of participant observation at the French consulate in Yaoundé, Cameroon. I observed the visa interviews in the morning, the processing of the application files in the afternoon, as well as the decision-making process before the closing of the office. Fieldwork notes from the period of observation were complemented with informal semi-open interviews with consulate staff, with visa applicants outside of the consulate office and aspiring migrants in more intimate and research-prone settings. The research on visa application procedures formed part of a broader Ph.D. project on emigration trajectories from Anglophone Cameroon to Europe and other industrialised countries. The article thus also draws on 14 months of ethnographic research with aspiring migrants and their family members between 2007 and 2009.

As a German national, I had been able to access the French consulate partly because of accidental chains of contacts and partly because trust

was easily granted to a graduate from Sciences Po Paris – a school that many French diplomatic staff are likely to have passed through themselves. Trained in political science and development studies, I shared educational and cultural baggage with the consulate staff. Yet, I came to the consulate office with an ethnographic eye and a different purpose, i.e. the desire to work with my research towards an understanding of the regulation of migration that reflected the perspective and experience of aspiring migrants in a country of departure.

During fieldwork, I observed 48 general visa application interviews and eight marriage interviews. The interviews were held within the main administrative building of the Embassy and the officer in charge of marriage interviews was a 50 year old woman who belonged to the diplomatic corps of the embassy. Interviews for non-immigration visas, by contrast, are conducted mostly by locally employed French staff in a reception space at the entrance of the Embassy. Consulate staff did not ask visa applicants for their permission on whether I was allowed to observe the visa interviews. Whenever the question of my presence during the interviews arose, consulate staff presented me as an “intern” – which was largely how they themselves understood my engagement with their work.

Marriage migration and fortress Europe

In the last decade, politicians and policy makers have increasingly framed migration as an issue of security (Nyers, 2003, p. 1069; Spire, 2008, p. 16). The curbing of immigration has come to be the means through which greater security is thought to be achievable and secure borders have thus emerged as an important policy issue.

In 2007, there were about a 1000 visa applications at the French consulate in Cameroon for family reunion – this figure also includes visas for children re-joining their parents in France. Of these 1000 visa demands, 730 demands were granted. While more than two thirds of all family reunion visas are granted, officers placed emphasis on the applications that, according to them, had to be turned down. The focus of embassy staff is not on the number of legitimate and accepted visas, but, instead, there is recurrent talk of ‘fraud’ and the accusations of marriages of convenience. What the images, posters, and public statements portrayed is *de facto* not in alignment with the everyday dynamics of actual functioning of the consulate service.

De Genova suggests that state officials perform spectacles of border enforcement (2002, p. 436- 439). Such ‘border spectacles’ render visible the

illegality of migrants, but not the law that, in fact, produces the illegality of migrants. The legal production of illegality thus becomes naturalised and no longer seems to require further exploration. De Genova has elaborated on the performative aspect of border security in an immigration context. Yet, states engage in 'border spectacles' already when dealing with people who seek rights to move in places of emigration. As a consequence, the securitisation of border regimes – and thus not the marriage migration itself – merits critical investigation (Neal, 2009).

Bigo characterises the securitisation of border regimes in terms of a 'governmentality of unease'. In his critique, the contemporary mode of regulation of migration has led to the development of profiling techniques and related technologies that help to determine who is to be surveyed, questioned, detained or removed from the territory of receiving nation states (Bigo, 2002, p. 82). In turn, these technologies and techniques of governance reinforce the framing of migration as a security issue.

A study of the very process of securitisation can denaturalise contemporary common places on migration and security (De Haas, 2008) and open up new possibilities for framing border security. When discussing the securitisation of borders, it is important to render explicit whose security issues are at stake, from what security needs to be protected and for what ends security ought to be achieved (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007, pp. 13-21). In opposition to state-driven understandings of security, Gasper and Truong advocate the human security framework as a helpful analytical framework through which to study migration. The human security framework supports human rights concerns, manages to go beyond the Westphalian framework that considers states as the main actors and categories of analysis, and, finally, also allows space for the importance of communities, families and identities in the constitution of security (Gasper & Truong, 2010, p. 14).

Where the threat to security is located depends heavily on the standpoint from which the analysis is conducted. Most commonly, border security refers to the security of the national welfare state (Spire, 2008, p. 52) and its citizens that need to be protected from criminals, terrorists, and other intruders (see for an example Graham, 2000, pp. 186- 187). This reflects a statist way of understanding the security and migration nexus. In the context of border crossings, it requires much more explicit explanation when security is to refer to the (human) security of aspiring migrants and their families (for example Doomernik, 2004; Abiri, 2000, pp. 72-73). This article takes security as a starting point of analysis, yet leaves open its supposed meaning and relationship to migration.

In relation to marriage visa interviews at the consulate, embassy staff

and visa applicants both ask themselves a set of security related questions. Consulate staff rationalise their work through a narrative of wanting to ensure the safety of their own citizens, as well as the body of the nation. Regulatory dynamics are driven by fears and accusations that visa applicants might be committing fraud – often with respect to the welfare state for their selfish personal purposes. At the same time, Internet-mediated marriages, marriages with foreigners, and marriages with Cameroonians abroad are ways for Cameroonian women to achieve security through social and geographical mobility. As the Cameroonian state does not provide the welfare provisions that Cameroonians aspire towards, families have to function as security nets for its respective members. The consequence of the structural adjustment programmes still endure and families thus often try to secure welfare through cross-border strategies. Geographical mobility in Cameroon has thus become synonymous with social mobility and human security for the entire family.

Marriage visa interviews: securing borders through suspicions of fraud

Within the general literature on human trafficking, the phenomenon of 'mail order brides' is often referred to as a specific subtype or form of 'human trafficking' (Constable, 2003). This imaginary of marriage migration in the Cameroonian context very much contrasts with the narrative of mail-order brides in Asia, where women are the defenceless victims of brutal American or European men. In Yaoundé, the eager search by consulate officers for fraud within marriage migration aims to protect vulnerable French men from Cameroonian women who are only interested in money. In the Cameroon context, French men are the victims of (Internet-mediated) marriages and Cameroonian women are said to lure French men with their beauty into disastrous marriages.

Since March 2007, all women seeking to migrate as the spouses of French citizens need to pass an interview at the Embassy of their country of origin. As a matter of principle, consulate staff is obliged to issue immigration visas to the spouses of its citizens. Even if staff suspects fraud, they can mostly only delay the visa application procedure, refuse to recognise the marriage as valid or not issue a certificate that is necessary for couples that still intend to marry in Cameroon. Marriage visa interviews serve to verify the legality of birth certificates and marriage certificates, as well as the intentions of the foreign spouse.

Not all women who come for their appointment at the Embassy are aware that they are to pass an interview. The interviews are designed to check for lies and inconsistencies within and between the narrative, the documents, and digital data. During the interview, the officers would test all data for internal coherency, as well as compare information from the interview with computer data that might have been entered upon a prior visa application of the aspiring Cameroonian spouse.

For the sake of being able to go in-depth, I concentrate in what follows in particular on one encounter between a consulate officer and an aspiring migrant woman, Claire. The focus of the analysis will be on the communication dynamics between officer and visa applicant, rather than on the marriage and migration trajectory of Claire herself. I had never met Claire before the interview, nor did I see her again afterwards. All that I know of her case stems from the moment of the interview itself.

When Claire entered the office, the consulate officer did not consider it necessary to explain my presence to her. Claire sat down opposite the officer's desk and could only see 'the other white woman' from the corner of the eye as I was sitting on the side. Once Claire was seated, the consulate officer asked question after question and noted down all of Claire's answers into the computer file. 'When and how did you meet?' 'Where?' 'Did he write to you first or you?' 'How did it go?' 'When did you start talking on the phone?' 'Was the website geared towards French men or could a Cameroonian man also have responded to your add?' From the answers that Claire gave throughout the interview, I gathered that Claire had put her profile on a dating website (called www.chichou.com) with the explicit purpose of getting married. After two months of online correspondence, Claire started to talk over the phone with her fiancé. Two years later, they decided to get married. Claire is in her 30s. Her fiancé is in his 40s and already has one child from a former marriage. The couple had not yet met in person.

All the encounters between the consulate officer in charge and the Cameroonian women that I observed were fundamentally pre-structured and predetermined through the interview questions and its inherent assumptions. 'Are you sure it's the man of your life?' 'Who talked first about marriage?' 'If it does not work out, will you come back to Cameroon? What will you do if it does not work out?' After a short pause, Claire delivered the answer that the officer in front of her was expecting: 'I will go back home.' The officer nodded contently, wrote down the answers and continued to check further details. 'What is your future husband's address?' Telephone number? Job? Salary? Claire laughed in a shy manner. The officer said that it is normal to know the salary of your future husband. Claire thus over-

came her inhibition and told us that it was one- thousand nine-hundred and six Euros and thirty-three cents. The officer gave me a side-look. She later explained that the woman in question 'ha[d] prepared well for her interview.'

The only point at which Claire's marriage and migration project was at risk was when the officer asked about her prior travel projects. 'Have you ever asked for a visa before?' asked the officer. The first reply of the woman was to deny this. The officer looked at her computer screen and asked again. 'No? Are you sure? This is a crucial question.' After a little bit more insistence on the part of the officer, the woman changed her response. She 'admitted' to having asked for a visa with the French Consulate in 2002. At that time, she had tried to go for training with an NGO, but the visa had been denied. 'We are here to arrange this marriage. Be honest with me and I will be honest with you,' the officer explained and continued to compare the new information with data on the computer from prior visa applications. The officer was checking for 'lies'. There was no 'lie' in that file and this prior application thus did not block Claire in her current procedure.

The question catalogue continued. After having gone through Claire's employment history and the couple's marriage plans, future life prospects were examined. 'What will you do with your child in Cameroon?' 'If you want to have children in France, where will you keep them?' 'Have you already spoken with the mother of your future husband on the phone?' During another marriage interview with a French male resident of Cameroon, the officer had excused herself for having to ask certain questions. In this prior case, the couple was living together and the woman was expecting a child. The French husband was present during the interview. Upon seeing the stomach of the woman, the officer had exclaimed: 'That says it all!' Childbirth automatically validated the supposed love that motivated and founded the marital union.

At the end of the interview with Claire, the officer printed out the interview material and asked for a signature. As Claire got up, she asked her first question. The consulate officer did not immediately understand Claire's question, but it eventually emerged that her fiancé would soon be coming to Cameroon. Claire had scheduled this appointment in the hope of being able to get married when he visited her. The consulate officer was taken by surprise. 'You did not tell me everything!' she exclaimed in an annoyed tone.

Thirty minutes of intense questioning had not allowed for space for Claire to express and explain herself. The time had been structured by the consulate officer's questions and she had not anticipated the fiancé of this

woman to be so committed to the marriage to have already booked a flight. While the officer was visibly beginning to look at the matter in a much more positive light, she explained that there was little she could do to speed up the legalisation processes of the documents of the Cameroonian fiancé. Yet, she had a warmer and friendlier voice. A first layer of suspicion had been eliminated.

Implicit assumptions on love set the tone of marriage interviews in consulates. While the marriage interview tested love by gathering information on the past and future plans of the couple and their level of familiarity with each other, it is de facto relatively rare that the data is actually used for visa decisions. Consulate staff routinely gather a lot of data on rather intimate details of the couple's relationship during the marriage interviews that would only be of use in the highly unlikely scenario that a *certificat de capacité de mariage* was to be denied. The extended efforts put into recording large amounts of rather intimate information ought to be seen as part of the production of a spectacle. The interview is a technology designed not to simply yield information, but to produce confessions and moral compliance.

Constant accusations of fraud further serve to legitimise certain versions of marriage and to delegitimise others. During the entire interview, Claire was under suspicion for being Cameroonian and having vested interests and loyalties with her family of origin. The consulate officer interpreted any reference by Claire to prior and parallel loyalties as selfish. Yet, in the case of a marital failure or breakup, Claire was also expected to return 'home' to Cameroon. During the interview, Claire thus needed to convince the officer in front of her both that she is and that she is not attached to her family of origin in Cameroon.

Policing the borders through love and family norms

Love is intimately intertwined with law and sovereignty (D'Aoust, 2013). In the case of marriage migration from Cameroon, the notion of disinterested love is partly constructed through accusations of fraud from whom French male citizens and state welfare must be protected. As the supposed ideal type of disinterested love is never made explicit by state officials, all marriages to white men become directly associated with fraud. This becomes evident in some of the email posters that are visible in the consulate. Within the midst of his divorce, for example, a French husband wrote in an e-mail posted on the walls of the consulate:

My life has been destroyed by these women without any faith or scruples that only wish to enter France for reasons of nationality to then send back the money of their white husband to Yaoundé. [...] I have been the victim of extortions from the staircase of the airplane right through to my return. I've paid my worthless marriage certificate with two bottles of Whisky and 50,000 CFA' (roughly 80 Euros).³

Based on one particular case, all Cameroonian women in this e-mail poster were portrayed as entirely instrumental and thus implicitly contrasted to supposedly love-driven and vulnerable French citizens. All that Cameroonian women were said to want is citizenship, driving licences, allocations, and the capacity to bring over family members.

A well-organised network in France (with its centre in Paris) informs your beautiful Cameroonian ladies about any possible allocations. Without scruple or love, they know more about social benefits than the French. One goal only: to send as much money as possible to Africa.⁴

In this e-mail, responsibilities and obligations towards families of origin were dressed up as greed.⁵ Appalled by such interest-driven behaviour, the French man who was in the midst of his divorce discredits his former wife of any form of love and emotion and concludes his mail:

The 'white sweetheart' is but a commodity – just as the conceived and nationalised children of course. They don't stop at anything. Know that a wife who is not found suitable in Cameroon is immediately and without explanation sent back and divorced; thus imagine how information on French social protection is received!?! In France, it's a divorce without end. They don't mind to have sex during three or five years pretending to be in love!!!⁶

Since the love of his wife was fake, the statement of this former husband implies that the marriage had never been truly consumed. In his view, only sex with true love intentions validates a marriage. He labelled his marriage as a *marriage blanc* (i.e. a marriage that is fake) because the supposed ideal type of totally disinterested love did not drive it. In this light, the types of social regulations applicable within the legal system in France to cases of divorce seem exaggerated and unnecessary to the author of the e-mail. Through his letters, the French husband calls for a greater convergence of the authority of husband and state.

Legal frameworks express and impose gendered norms (Brown, 2007)

and specific family conceptions (Van Walsum, 2011). In the context of the French consulate, love is also the narrative that renders invisible the interests of the French state. Only those women are allowed into the body of French citizens who convincingly disavow prior loyalties to their family of origin during the interview and thus promise to become good and safe citizens by submitting – in the name of love – their own sense of initiative and autonomy to their new husband in France.

Laws reflect gender values of given states and societies in the past, too. After 1961, for example, Cameroonians that wanted to travel were required by the newly independent state structures to apply for exit visas. The decree No. 62-DF-23 of the 17th of January 1962 instituted the federal passport and introduced other forms of regulation for the emigration of Cameroonians from the territory of the Federal Republic of Cameroon. To obtain an exit visa, Cameroonians leaving the country needed, for example, to pay 50.000 CFA to the Cameroon Treasury. This money was to ‘guarantee’ the ‘repatriation’ of the person asking for the exit visa. Married women who applied for these exit visas required furthermore the written authorisation of their husbands and a copy of their marriage certificate.

In the context of contemporary marriage migration, it becomes important to critically analyse which particular set of family norms is assumed and promoted by both consulate officers and family members of aspiring migrant women. Regardless of the cultural and geographical context, the idea of marriage as the union of only two individuals is but a cultural construct. Marital unions always connect two sets of family networks with one another. When French consulate officers discredit French Cameroonian marriages because of the security stakes around French citizenship, they forget that Cameroonian-Cameroonian marriages also have to struggle through important issues of conflicting loyalties between families of origin and families of procreation. It is also within these struggles over multiple understandings of family norms and womanhood that diverging, as well as converging, security agendas express themselves.

Conclusion

At the French consulate, e-mails written by French male citizens located the threats to citizenship boundaries with the selfishness and fake intentions of Cameroonian women. Consulate officers at the French Embassy identified with the core message of these e-mails and considered them as justifications for their work. Regulatory dynamics at both the French con-

sulate office are driven by fears and accusations that visa applicants and their family members might be committing fraud for their own egoistic purposes. Through these accusations, state authorities locate the security threat with visa applicants and aspiring spouses.

Following De Genova's argument on the legal production of illegality, this article has explored the bureaucratic production of fraud and selfishness. In other words, rather than taking at face value the location of the security problem with the visa applicants, I have analysed the very process that constructs these visa applicants as fraudulent and selfish. What has emerged from this analysis is that regulatory dynamics at consulate offices reveal conflicting norms about legitimate marital unions and family loyalties between both consulate officers and aspiring migrant women and their families. It is by seeking to impose these that consulate officers construct visa applicants in general and aspiring female spouses in particular as supposedly 'fraudulent' and 'selfish'.

The notions of 'national well-being' and 'citizenship' that are supposed to be secured through the policing of borders are not gender neutral. The fraudulent and selfish subject in the case of marriage migration from Cameroon is female. The security rhetoric at embassies furthermore relies on cultural notions of relatedness (such as conjugal love and conduct, economic exchange, and kinship obligations) that can both diverge and converge with the notions of women and the regulatory logics of Cameroonian families. In this sense, the article is situated not simply at 'the border' but also at the frontier between different understandings of relatedness, gender, security, and welfare.

Consulate officers seek to secure fortress Europe by, amongst others, framing the loyalties of Cameroonian spouses with their families of origin as egoistic and greedy. Yet, what is marked in French e-mail posters as acts of selfishness constitutes the primary duty of a daughter towards her family of origin in Cameroon. These multiple perspectives of security issues at stake in marriage migration are not independent from each other. The regulatory requirements of states can come to reconstitute kinship systems (Piot, 2010, pp. 79- 83), just as kinship norms evolve and push the boundaries of border regimes (Spijkerboer, 2013). Fortress Europe is thus not only the site of multiple notions of security, but also of their respective transformation.

Notes

1. I wish to thank the Amsterdam Institute for Social Sciences Research at the University of Amsterdam for having generously funded the fieldwork on which I draw for the purpose of this article.
2. Trying to feminise the acting of committing fraud, the man is here inventing a new word. With 'faussiere', he is referring to a person who commits fraud.
3. 'Ma vie est détruite pour ces femmes sans foi ni loi qui ne souhaitent que rentrer en France pour la nationalité et envoyer tout l'argent de leur 'blanc' à Yaoundé. J'ai été racketté de l'escalier de l'avion jusqu'au retour. J'ai payé mes actes de mariage 'bidon' contre deux bouteilles de Whisky et 50.000 Francs CFA.'
4. 'Un réseau fort bien organisé en France, (le noyau dur à Paris) renseigne vos belles Camerounaises sur toutes les prestations disponibles. Sans scrupule et sans amour, elles en savent plus que les français en terme d'allocations. Un seul but: envoyer le plus d'argent possible en Afrique.'
5. Interestingly, the commodification process is supposed to operate exactly opposite to the discourse of mail order brides.
6. 'Le 'chéri blanc' n'est qu'une marchandise, tout comme les enfants conçus et nationalisés bien sûr. Elles ne reculent devant rien. Sachez qu'une femme qui ne convient pas, au Cameroun, est répudiée sur le champ sans explication, alors imaginez l'information sur la protection sociale française!?! En France c'est un divorce interminable. Et elles s'en fichent de coucher pendant trois ou cinq ans en faisant semblant d'être amoureuse!!!'

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